

S&F Online

www.barnard.edu/sfonline

Double Issue: 3.3 & 4.1

The Scholar & Feminist XXX:

Past Controversies, Present Challenges, Future Feminisms

Document Archive

Reprinted from:

What is Feminism?

Juliet Mitchell & Ann Oakley, Editors

New York: Pantheon Books, 1986

Reflections on Twenty Years of Feminism

By:

Juliet Mitchell

It is twenty-one years since the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. It seems a good time to look back— admittedly with nostalgia, but more importantly with some critical reflections on the history of feminism in our times.

The Women's Liberation Movement started in the mid-sixties; its initiating literature preceded it by about a year. Looking back from the eighties, Umberto Eco, at the opening of *The Name of the Rose*, writes of the late nineteen-sixties when he discovered his fictional manuscript: 'In the years when I discovered the Abbé Vallet volume, there was a widespread conviction that one should write only out of commitment to the present, in order to change the world. Now, after ten years or more, the man of letters . . . can happily write out of pure love of writing ... [a story] gloriously lacking in any relevance for our day, atemporally alien to our hopes and our certainties.'¹

The heady days of sixties radical protest— Blacks, Students, Women— are over. I believe that the transition to the relative inactivity of the eighties indicates more than the fact that our movement has come of age, more too— though this is true— than that those of us who were active at the outset are now looking back from the seeming quietude of middle age. If we must recollect in tranquility, perhaps we should try to understand why this is so.

Feminism as a body of thought and as a political movement marches on, but has it developed? What Eco points to as a generality suggests something disturbing in the specifics of feminism. In order to reflect on the significance for feminism of this transition of spirit, I shall focus on two questions: What large-scale changes have there

been in the position of women in the last two decades? And what is the relationship of feminism of these changes?

By way of an apology for the crudities of my use of history and economics in this essay, I would emphasize that I am neither a historian nor an economist. From the standpoints of these disciplines, mine is very much an outsider's curiosity. My questions come from an attempt to understand the position of women as a feminist and a psychoanalyst.

I shall use England as my source material for the obvious reason that it is the country with which I am most familiar. But also because, in the past, its development has been, in some ways, exemplary and it can thus be used not for its particularities but for its generalities. In this way what I am aiming at is not a history, but a case-history— an instance that can stand in for others.

Feminism in England and North America has interacted extensively, reflecting in this, the general political and economic involvement of the two countries. But I shall use what little I know about the United States only to ask some questions about England; not to examine American processes but to use American results to question our experiences. America often appears to be ten or even twenty years ahead of us. Does American society prefigure a general historical change? Perhaps change is now retarded in England? Can we use America and England against each other to show up more widespread changes in Western capitalism?

The most dramatic change affecting women in England— indeed, in Europe— is the steep rise in unemployment. Within the growing unemployment, the most significant factor for feminism is that women form the only sector of the community with increased employment prospects. Women, usually in early middle age, are getting the jobs. As a well-known British economist recently told a group of high-school leavers: 'it is not you who will find jobs, but your mothers'. Of course, while such polemic is true, it is also misleading.

The situation is not as in wartime when women literally took over jobs that were, and would again be, done by men. Today women are doing the type of service jobs that men have never done and that young people, starting adult life, would probably not consider doing.

In the twenty odd years of feminism in Britain, women have increased as a percentage of the labour-force from 33 per cent to 40

per cent (a figure reached twenty years ago in the United States). In an overall way, relative to men's, women's work is increasing so that it is predicted that by 1990 women will take up two-thirds of the net increases in jobs. What are we witnessing in the increased employment of women?

The entry of women into jobs at a time of male unemployment has happened before. It is not a unique phenomenon - there have been other moments in history when a comparable switch in the economic distribution of the sexes has occurred. Do these periods have something in common, do these repeated occurrences suggest that women serve a particular function at certain given historical junctures?

In Europe today, are we experiencing a crisis, a period of prolonged transition, some adaption to a new form of capitalism, or are our apocalyptic nightmares of nuclear destruction an ideological reflection of the fact that we are in the very late stages of the decline and fall of a way of life, a major mode of production?

I want to suggest tentatively that by many and complex comparisons of the position of women at various historical conjunctures, we could gain some insight into the type of process in which we are presently caught up. Several political thinkers have, in different ways, argued that the position of women in society indicates the general level of social advance; I am wondering whether we could not produce a more specific analysis that would help us to see where we are.

Our situation as women at any given time may not only be a general index of social advance towards a humane and equitable society, but a more sensitive (and problematic) indication of the stage of the process of social change. Thus I do not entirely agree, for instance, with either Fourier or Marx, that the position of women signals the level of civilization, so that the better our position, the higher the values of the society. The history of women's status is a more stop-go affair— a reflection not only, or not so much, of general social improvement, as of the unevenness of social change.

My tentative hypothesis is that women are used within the economy as a temporary advance guard or, perhaps, as a toe in the water of an unknown sea. I suggest that women are the first, temporary inhabitants of the future. That, contrary to myth, within history, it may well be that women are there first and that then men are made in the image of women. If this is so, it may well be true only of capitalist or only of industrial countries. It may be true more

generally; I do not know.

I shall single out one striking instance from the past of the increasing employment of women in the context of rising male unemployment— an instance whose documentation by Friedrich Engels has become part of the fabric of contemporary feminist thought.

Engels's *The Condition of the Working Class in Britain in 1844* is a superb work of social history in the tradition of Mayhew and other classical nineteenth-century observers. The shift from small-scale manufacturing to the vast industrial factories was taking place— machinery that could replace human labour threw men out of work. But it was women and children who first went in to undertake the new work of running and servicing the machinery. By a close survey of conditions in major new industrial centres, particularly Manchester, Engels breaks down the general observation that the introduction of new machinery is responsible for the widespread unemployment:

Let us examine somewhat more closely the tact that machinery more and more supersedes the work of men. The human labour, involved in both spinning and weaving, consists chiefly in piecing broken threads, as the machine does all the rest. This work requires no muscular strength, but only flexibility of finger. Men are, therefore, not only not needed for it, but actually, by reason of the greater muscular development of the hand, less fit for it than women and children, and are, therefore, naturally almost superseded by them. Hence, the more the use of the arms, the expenditure of strength, can be transferred to steam or water-power, the fewer men need be employed and as women and children work more cheaply, and in these branches better than men, they take their places. In the spinning mills women and girls are to be found in almost exclusive possession of the throstles; among the mules one man adult spinner (with self-actors, he, too, becomes superfluous), and several piecers for tying the threads, usually women and children, sometimes young men of from eighteen to twenty years, here and there an old spinner thrown out of other employment. At the power-looms women, from fifteen to twenty years, are chiefly employed, and a few men; these however, rarely remain at this trade after their twenty-first year. Among the preparatory machinery, too, women alone are to be found, with here and there a man to clean and sharpen the carding-frames . . . the actual work of the mills is done by women and children.²

What Engels, of course, could not foresee in 1844 was that once the transition was effected, men would take over as the main industrial work-force.

Are there any meaningful resemblances to our own epoch? At first it would seem that the global comparisons are only of increased general unemployment and, within this, a relative increase in women's employment. To compare our inner cities, and child poverty and abuse with Dickensian England, seems at first sight preposterous and vulgarly polemical. There are, of course, important differences - but I suggest that there are important similarities too.

What were the social effects of women's vanguard entry into industrial production? Engels commented on the early sexual maturity of mill-girls (thought to be the effects of over-heating as in the tropics), the promiscuity, the illegitimacy, the rate of abortions, the amenorrhea and the infertility. New and more virulent sex-based diseases appeared. He observed how adolescents came to use their homes as bed-and-breakfast lodging houses; often the family bread-winners, they appeared more like the adults to their unemployed and hence infantilized fathers. To illustrate the effects on the previously established sexual division of labour, Engels reports a conversation between his working-class friend Joe, and Joe's mate. Jack:

' . . . my poor missus is i' th' factory; she has to leave at half-past five and works till eight at night, and then she is so knocked up that she cannot do aught when she gets home, so I have to do everything for her what I can, for I have no work, nor had any for more nor three years, and I shall never have any more work while I live;' and then he wept a big tear. Jack again said: 'There is work enough for women folks and childer hereabouts, but none for men; thou mayest sooner find a hundred pound on the road than work for men - but I should never have believed that thou or anyone else would have seen me mending my wife's stocking, for it is bad work. But she can hardly stand on her own two feet; I am afraid she will be laid up, and then I don't know what is to become of us, for it's a good bit she has been the man in the house and I the woman; it is bad work, Joe;' and he cried bitterly, and said 'It has not been always so ... thou knowest when I got married I had work plenty. . . . And we had a good furnished house, and Mary need not go to work. I could work for the two of us; but now the world is upside down. Mary has to go to work and I have to stop at home and mind the childer, sweep and wash, bake and mend; and, when the poor woman comes home at

night, she is knocked up. Thou knows, Joe, it's hard for one that was used different.'³

In his commentary, Engels fairmindedly reminds us that this family-turned-upside-down should act as evidence of the pristine inhumanity of male rule in a family 'the right way up'. The restoration of the traditional patriarchal structure is no solution to this 'insane slate of things'.

Today, we are not going through a transition from smaller-scale home or community based work to industrial manufacture with its massive institutions of factories and schools, nor are we coming directly out of such an industrialized, urban world into something else. Many changes have intervened between 1844 and 1984. My point here is merely a comparison of two moments of transition in the same country in the advanced world.

There may be historical moments when the normal processes of change are speeded up. A major economic shift, at certain times, may demand a social change which amounts to a trauma. Old lines of class opposition are redrawn, the meanings of masculinity and femininity nudge each other and jostle for new places. In Engels's words, at a point of transition, the crisis 'unsexes the man and takes from the woman all womanliness without being able to bestow on the man true womanliness or on the woman true manliness. . .'.⁴

Today, maybe, a new dominant class opposition and a new content to the definition of sexual difference are in their birth-throes. Maybe this shift is being effected through employed women and unemployed men.

The sexual revolution of the nineteen-sixties had its revolutionary moment repressed and succeeded by drugs, disease and the desperate crime and violence of the urban dispossessed. In England we now have the curtailment of social welfare, of education, of medical care— the sending into the community, as in the early nineteenth century, of the newly and obnoxiously designated 'unemployable'. And in the home— for the working class— once more, the family turned upside down. While this crisis and chaos continues, can we glimpse aspects of the social change it indicates?

Using the United States as our retrospective forecast we can see that, in this area, what has been achieved is an acceptance of fairly high full-time unemployment, low social services and a highly mobile and relatively flexible work-force.

The change that is taking place in England is towards a similar

level of unemployment screened by an ideology of a leisure society, from full-time to part-time employment and from manufacturing to service industries. The very words— part-time work, leisure, service— sum up our image of women. But then so did other features, such as nimble fingers, characterize women for factory owners and their critics alike, 140 years ago. Our idiom, as is typical in other fields as well, has changed from the physiological psychology of the nineteenth century to the sociological psychology of the twentieth.

In England today, we have a situation in which male industrial workers are thrown out of jobs because of the closure or near complete computerization of heavy industries— steel, coal, shipping, and middle-aged women are employed part-time in the service industries. Overall the only increase in employment is among the self-employed for men and the part-time for women. The self-employed men are small-time entrepreneurs, often encouraged initially by small government grants, the part-time women are in cleaning, catering, hairdressing and other personal services, if they are working class, and in the professional and scientific services, if they are middle class. The largest categories of unemployed are the old and the young, creating on the one hand a sector needing services, and on the other, a severe degree of demoralization manifested not in radical politics but in urban decay, vandalism and rioting.

When they leave school at sixteen and for the next few years, the distinction between boys and girls is apparently obliterated; they share the same fate: unemployment. They cannot become coal-miners or coal-miners' wives. We cannot know what they will become. Perhaps we will have to wait a generation or more to see if the lack of sexual differentiation at the level of employment and occupation remains. Somehow I doubt it, despite the tendency towards this at the moment. Already in America, in the mid-eighties, there is an increase in sex-based segregation at work despite earlier countervailing impressions.

Even within the period of critical change, its crisis marked by the entry of women into employment, a glance at education and training suggests that future sex differentiation may be lying in wait to be redeployed in a period of stabilization.

Both sexes of school-leavers are characterized by unemployment; they differ in that boys fare worse. Boys are more unemployed. At eighteen, 23 per cent of boys and 18 per cent of girls are without jobs. But there is a further difference between those who are not in

paid employment but who are occupied: there are more boys in some sort of training scheme and more girls in some sort of education beyond the age at which it is compulsory. (Of girls who are in training schemes, by far the higher proportion are in ones run by employers in a fashion somewhat analogous to those run by benevolent factory-owners in the nineteenth century.) I believe that once men and women become identical as a new social class or occupy new positions together within the same re-defined social class, a sexual division— drawn along new lines of connotation — will operate within this.

When children went into the factories 150 and more years ago, they did so regardless of sex— but within the overall similarities, there were specific occupational differences. A few decades later, compulsory education was established to 'teach the orphan boy to read' for the new technology, the 'orphan girl to sew' for the services needed. If today boys are getting more training and girls more education, is it so that the boy orphaned from the traditional working class will be able to man the computers, and the orphan girl, with her education, to care for the aged, the sick and the needs of the leisured, the child and the 'unemployable'? Probably that is too simple a division. But at least while we wait and see in what ways or whether the present distinction in today's unemployed youth is significant, we can observe that a training is immediately geared to future employment (as reading was in the nineteenth century), whereas, like sewing, a general education at a time when, in England, education is being massively down-graded, will keep. We should note too, the surely significant fact that, while girls have made a shift from their almost exclusive occupation with languages and the arts into the sciences, it is particularly into the non-applied, above all the biological, sciences, that they have gone. The one science into which girls have made no important increase in their entry in the last decade is computer science (indeed, the numbers of girls entering it have slightly declined).

In this period of intensified change, as a general tendency, it seems that older women are taking on new jobs. Both middle- and working-class women take on these jobs, which, I believe, will be the jobs of the future working class— male and female. Men, at this point, become unemployed. However, from within the ranks of the unemployed men and possibly from among the newly employed middle-class women, a new group of the self-employed and of entrepreneurs emerges. It is this 'self-employment', then, that produces the necessary dominant ideology of 'classlessness' mandatory for any transition. It has happened before.

What has been the relationship of feminism to the processes of social change, those processes that have so dubiously focused on the advancement of women into the workforce?

If women are put into a temporary vanguard position in relation to economic and social change, this cannot be the result of an overnight directive; something must facilitate this shift. In looking at this question of the role of ideology in relation to changes in production, it is important to bear in mind differences of social class.

In this context, what has been the conscious role and unconscious function of the women's movement and its dominant concepts in the last two decades?

I believe that our feminist attacks on the system, despite our intentions, were highly complicit with the present changes. This is not to castigate ourselves (though certainly self-criticism is involved), but rather to demonstrate once more that a radical politics, indeed any radical thought, must bear the marks of its origin which may not be perceived until it is too late.

Looking back, for the sake of an organizing schema, we can divide our recent feminist history into two stages. To characterize the two stages I would invert the title of a preceding anthology of essays which I edited with Ann Oakley in 1976. It was called *The Rights and Wrongs of Women*, itself the title of a seminal essay by Margaret Walters on, among others, Mary Wollstonecraft who, as well as writing *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, wrote a novel called *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman*.

The first stage of our movement was directed to putting right the wrongs of women, the second to an emphasis on the values, the importance of the qualities of womanhood and femininity— peace, caring, nurturance. (We should note the further turn of the screw about the rights of women— again the predictable discovery in recent feminist literature that we are all wrong (in another way) after all. Now we are full of masochism, the desire to be abused or raped, our own worst enemies— thus we help prepare the way for the redenigration of women as the time fast approaches when we will step back from the front lines into our marginality. But by this point I think what we can call our wave of feminism has heard its death knell— the term feminism loses all meaning at this stage of self-flagellation.) Such a schema is too simple, but it will do for the purpose of organizing our recent history.

First the wrongs. In England, our demands were two-pronged: on the one hand, for equal pay and work opportunities and, on the

other, for a change in the sexual image and status of women. Both were badly needed.

If we examine critically our struggle for equal pay and work opportunities (again, within the ethics of our society, perfectly proper aims in themselves), the nominal achievement of these facilitated future male unemployment and the debasement— temporarily— of the condition of workers in general. To go back once more to 1844, Engels had commented on the role of the cheap labour of women and children: its task was to introduce a lower standard of living and lower wages for men. In the intervening period the trade union movement to protect the rights of workers had been established and the threat to the male worker's wage of women's cheaper labour had been recognized. Once, in the late sixties, women had been awarded the right to equal pay (in fact only achieved today in Britain, nearly eighteen years later, in the police force and among butchers), there could no longer be any union opposition to their employment. However, women's real pay is always lower and women predominantly work part-time and hence are largely unprotected. Women are poorly unionized at a time when union strength was to be assailed from all sides; lacking job security and health and old-age benefits, women have no reason, therefore, to move jobs or move out of jobs should the need arise. Our aim was equal pay; a tragic effect of our achievement was to remove pay as obstacle and then to erode the conditions of employment, to help lower the expectation of social security, state benefits, trade union support . . . workers' solidarity ... to make way for a mobile, flexible worker and the self-employed. In fighting for equal pay, in no way was this our intention, but the passing of the law did facilitate the change.

Consciously we were attacking a consumer society and the place of women within it. We slapped stickers over the Underground— 'this ad insults women', attacked 'Miss World' contests and challenged the treatment of women as sex objects. In America the epiphany, whether truth or fiction, was the bra-burning in Washington.

Twenty years ago in Europe, women were used as sexual objects in advertising and in the media in a far more blatant way than was the case in the USA. I can remember how appalled American feminists were by our bill-boards. I have done no statistical survey but, as a lay observer, I believe we have far fewer advertisements using women as their sales object today in Britain; instead there is a proportionate increase in appeals to minority groups such as Blacks. Had above all to children (again America was far ahead of us in this). The child, not the housewife, is today's consumer. Is this removal of

women from advertising to be chalked up as a success for feminist campaigns, or as something more complex over which we had no control?

I wonder, though this does not invalidate the protests, whether in fact we are not attacking something already on the way out. Were we giving a helpful shove to an ideology that was already inappropriate? In the late sixties and early seventies we were attacking women as objects of consumer campaigns at exactly the time when women were wanted back into the workforce. It was precisely the housewives who a decade earlier had had to vie for the whitest wash of all who were now wanted for the part-time labour force—their children could be compensated by more and more toys. Women were not to be sex objects but service workers. In attacking the place of women in consumer society and in simultaneously promoting the employment of women, unwittingly, we were perhaps assisting a change already taking place.

In the second phase of our movement we attacked the idealization of women by men in territories occupied by women only: the home, reproduction and caring for others. This 'pedestal' treatment, like all idealizations, was rightly seen to contain its negative, denigratory side.

It is interesting that after attacking the pedestal treatment of women as earth-mothers, after fighting and showing that we could do what men could do, we then discovered that for our vision of equality, we needed them to do what we could do. Motherhood and domesticity having been negatively appraised, we re-valued them. And so with the wrongs nominally righted, the way was open for the positive aspects of womanhood to be rediscovered. In discovering our values, we made the social and the psychological areas traditionally occupied by women fit for occupation by men—the home was a place for men to inhabit while the women went out into the world of work—for the time being. We facilitated a social shift: if women were to become more like men, men were also to be more like women: 'Men and women cannot be equal partners outside the home, if they are not equal partners inside it', wrote Ann Oakley. For the middle classes this was, and is, very acceptable; a four day week for the professional man with paternity leave and the real pleasures of comfortably off child-care and domesticity; for the woman, a part-time job in which the lack of security presents no hazards. For the working-class couple it is another story: an unemployed coal-miner and his wife bringing in the earned income from cleaning or clerical work. In theory, women, unified as a group, could do similar service jobs, whatever their class, but with

very different effects.

However, something yet more important than our facilitation of women into the work-force and out of an old-style, consumer-oriented femininity seems to have been going on.

Challenging the wrongs of women— at work, as sex objects, in education— we were comparing ourselves with men. We could then assert our discrete and independent value. To do this we created or recreated a new unity: women. With tortuous arguing in the early days, we tried to see whether we could call ourselves a class, a caste, a social group and so on. The point is that, calling ourselves 'sisters', we created ourselves once more as a category.

When I started working on the topic of women in 1962, it was virtually impossible to get the differential information on the sexes – I remember how particularly hard it was in the field of education. Everything was broken down into socio-economic groups. Today I find the reverse: it is easy to obtain information on male/female differences but not on social class achievements and positions.

In forging a concept of women as a unity, we promoted a situation in which old class antagonisms would shift through a period of chaos into something new. In recognizing on paper the class and race distinctions of women but being unable, by definition, to make them the focal thrust of our movement, we contributed to an ideology that temporarily homogenized social classes and created a polarity that disguised other distinctions by the comprehensive, all-embracing opposition— men/women.

We aimed to erode, and indeed did in part erode, the old distinctions between men and women, yet to do so we helped create a major opposition between the sexes. The paradox is only apparent.

By setting up the opposition of the sexes as dominant, we helped to produce the ideological notion of a 'classless' society by which, in this instance, one may mean a society in which the transition to new class lines, or a new class composition, has not yet solidified.

I am left with the two questions with which I started out. What is the meaning of the changed position of women in the last two decades? And, what is the relationship of feminism to this change?

If it is true, as the statistics assert, that women's employment has increased in the wake of male unemployment, what is the cause and what is the effect of this? In the first instance, it would seem that

women at work serve to debase the standard of living, to create a new poor from the conditions of the industrial working-class family. Despite 'equal' pay acts, women are used to lower pay and lower conditions of work, to lower expectations; when men, in the future, take over the new jobs from women, the snail of progress will have slithered a foot back down the well. With men's future re-employment firmly established, the snail will struggle up again until the next crisis. But is there something less cyclical going on? Is there more of a linear progression in process, with less backwards slides? Through women's marginality and hence through our flexibility can humankind as a social being move for ever upwards? Do women put the future on trial? The one possibility does not exclude the other.

Both the forward-looking and the complicit aspects of feminism would seem to echo these two possibilities. But first the statistics of change must be looked at more closely. Feminist historians are starting to question Engels's portrait of the increased employment of women in 1844 and, today, even as in this essay I try to construct a picture, its prime colours start to decompose. The very statistics of women's entry into production are subject to both class and sex bias.

There is a massive labour force of working-class and immigrant women which is hidden—I am not here referring to the vexed issue of unpaid labour of childcare and housework— but to the paid, undeclared 'casual' labour and to the home-based production in the myriad forms of 'outwork'. Most women in England always work for wages of some sort. Is the claimed increase of women into production a largely middle-class phenomenon that casts its hegemonic mantle over other women's invisibility? Has one of feminism's unconscious tasks in getting woman out of history's hiding places been to turn her, for the time being, into a legitimate wage-earner for a family with an unemployed man? Does the creation of an umbrella category, 'Woman,' falsely suggest that middle-class entry into and exit from production which is sporadic, applies to all classes? Is my very argument in this essay trapped in the trammels of the class and sexist assumptions that it is trying to analyse?

In one women's liberation group in which I participated around 1970, we set ourselves the task of charting the amount and nature of the work and the conditions of women 'outworkers' in the area of London where we lived. The result of our enquiry was to uncover an extensive mycelium which only occasionally mushroomed above ground into legality and hence statistics. Today, we have national statistics on 'outwork'. As a further ironic twist of our type of enquiry, a family is less eligible for state benefits where the woman is known to be working.

What we can probably say with some confidence is that, overall, there is a large increase in the number of women seen to be working both in absolute terms and in relation to men. I think also that it is quite likely that women who worked in invisible jobs have for the time shifted into recognized work; maybe this is in addition to their previous work becoming recognized. Certainly it would seem that there is a real increase in middle-class, middle-aged women working for the first time since motherhood.

If we look back at the history of feminism, to its fits and starts, its uneven development over the past 300 years, do its times of efflorescence coincide with a particular type of social and economic transition that temporally places women in a vanguard position either through their new entry or newly acknowledged entry into production? This possibility makes sense to me. It was the eminent feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton who encouraged the advance of women, not into production but into a new relationship to circulation, that of consumption, with these words, to an imaginary congressman's wife:

Go and buy a new stove! Buy what you need! Buy while he's in Washington! When he returns and flies into a rage, you sit in a corner and weep. That will soften him! Then when he tastes his food from the new stove, he will know you did the wise thing. When he sees you so much fresher, happier in your new kitchen, he will be delighted and its bills will be paid. I repeat - GO OUT AND BUY.⁵

Feminism does emanate from the bourgeoisie or the petit-bourgeoisie, the social class which, in capitalist society, where it is dominant, gives its values to the society as a whole. It represents its particular interest as universal interest, its women as 'woman'. To see this is not to turn aside from feminism, but to note that as yet it has not transcended the limitations of its origins. We should use any radical movement or thought as an early warning system to make us aware of changes already in process.

In arguing as feminists for an end to the sexual division of labour, for social bisexuality, were we promoting an ongoing process of capitalism, a process whose triumph could only be enjoyed under socialism?

Many have argued that the process of capitalism (leading, indeed, to the communism envisaged by Marx and Engels) reduces the distinction between the sexes to the point of disappearance. Lyotard,

for instance, suggests that the creation of a social-psychological androgyne (again an ideological contribution from, among others, the women's movement) is the ultimate goal of an economy driven towards a final point which is organized solely around the circulation of exchange objects.

Certainly the thrust of our movement's intention was to overcome the opposition we had perceived and highlighted— to make men and women more alike. Whatever our positions, whether as socialist-feminists coming with Marxist traditions (more typical of England) or as radical feminists (more typical of the United States) our visions of the future eroded the division of labour within the family, destructured generational divisions and dispersed the family tasks of reproduction and nurturance into myriad alternatives.

However, I do not believe we are simply involved in a straightforward and inevitable progression to an ultimately androgynous society. If women are the vanguard troops of change, it is not only because the whole society is becoming feminized or androgynized— though that is partly true. It is also because, as women, we occupy a socially marginal and hence shiftable position.

At each crisis of change, I believe, we imagine this androgyne and this endless circulation and free play of multifarious differences; with each period of stabilization, something has to occupy the new point of opposition. In periods of intensified social change, men and women, the masculine and the feminine, come closer together; a new unity is created, a new man, and something different has to confront him. For the time being, we should note that, between the sexes, this new point of difference is called 'woman'.

I would suggest, then, that feminism is an ideological offspring of certain economic and social conditions. Its radicalism reflects the fact that it comes to prominence at points of critical change. It both abets this change and envisages it with an imagination that goes beyond it.

There was nothing wrong with our visions; they just reflected a shift already in process— as indeed they must, but we should have been conscious of this and (a matter for self-criticism) we were not. Again we can return to 1844. Like the machinery that replaced the gruelling labour, the leisure that could replace a long work week, the new technology and a sexual equality that was freed from the conditions of a class society would all be positive changes. This was our vision. As feminists we conceived yesterday's future.

Notes

I would like to thank Margaret Walters, Jennie Popay and the audiences of the Gauss seminars, Princeton, and of Barnard College, New York (1985) where earlier versions of this paper were presented.

1. Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose* (Seeker & Warburg, London 1983), 5.
2. Frederick Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844* (London 1952), 141.
3. *Ibid.*, 145.
4. *Ibid.*, 146.
5. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, quoted in Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola* (Methuen, London 1985), 20.